

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 001801

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA/CAR, WHA/AND; STATE PASS USAID AND OFDA;
NSC FOR SHANNON AND MADISON;
USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD;

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [DR](#)

SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS # 17: HELICOPTERS, FOREST
FIRES, HELP FROM ABROAD

REF: A. DAO IIR 6827-9897-05 OF 01 APRIL: VENEZUELA
CONTRIBUTES TASK FORCE SIMON BOLIVAR TO
[1](#)B. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC FIREFIGHTING EFFORT

[1](#)1. (SBU) This is #17 in our current series on politics in the
Dominican Republic:

HELICOPTERS, FOREST FIRES, HELP FROM ABROAD

With forest fires continuing to burn along the mountaintops in the Dominican Republic, Hugo Chavez has won a lot of Dominican good will with his dramatic and largely useless gesture of sending two Venezuela Cobra helicopters with water buckets to fight the fires. On March 28 the Dominican House of Representatives unanimously voted a resolution calling the fires a "National Disaster," asking for extensive investigations for possible arson, urging Dominicans to prevent forest fires, and "thanking eternally the sister Bolivarian republic of Venezuela personified by President Hugo Chavez, for the selfless solidarity for our people, providing equipment for a more efficient solution of the problem."

The immediate irony is that the Cobras are not much use for fire fighting, since they carry a load of only about 600 gallons per trip. Beyond that, however, although the Dominican administration sent this Embassy a diplomatic note last week requesting assistance with the fires, it refused to take the step of declaring a national disaster, the administrative action that can open access to U.S. disaster assistance. Political considerations were certainly part of this -- as they were in late 2004, when the same administration worried about its tourism profile and declined to declare a disaster after Hurricane Jeanne had passed over the Dominican Southeast. At that time the bridge on the Rio Chavon -- linking the South with the beach resorts -- was completely destroyed.

Early on in the current drama, the presidential spokesman made the blunder of declaring that U.S. aircraft were on the way -- without having checked that statement with anyone in the USG. This caused some confusion. Environment Minister Max Puig, who has had a grimly optimistic outlook toward the fires, accurately explained to journalists on March 29 the fact that United States assistance is not available except when national disasters are declared. He said then that the fires were "under control" and should be completely extinguished within two days. At that time pine forests covering 14,800 acres were alight. Under Secretary for Forestry Ernesto Reyna, who had flown over the area the previous day, said that there would be no need to bring in fixed-wing aircraft from Miami. But even today, April 1, the fires continue and the official prognosis is the same -- perhaps another 48 hours.

Papers on March 31 carried the story that Dominican Air Force helicopters couldn't help because the "Bambi buckets" like those used by the Venezuelan helicopters were sitting in Miami. That is true, strictly speaking -- those are excess defense articles donated to the Dominicans by the United States. For more than a year the Dominicans have been unable to make available the costs of transportation and demurrage, which by now amount to more than USD 200,000. This is of no great significance for the fires, however, because the Dominican helicopters are small ones with two-man crews, incapable of carrying enough water far enough or high enough to be of any use.

Following the Ambassador's notification to Washington of a disaster, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance has provided USD 50,000 that can be applied to help the Dominicans recover. The funds will probably be used to train local populations to fight fires. With the change of administrations in mid-2004, almost all of the recently trained staff of the Council for Emergencies (COE) lost their jobs to make way for Fernandez supporters.

The cartoonist in daily "El Caribe" had its own commentary about the situation, referring both to the fires and to grandstanding and hot political rhetoric from the opposition PRD over the last three weeks that blocked Senate action on vital legislation. A cartoon helicopter labeled "USA" is shown dragging a squirting garden hose, hovering over a flaming mountain. Says one pilot to the other: "Now what else was it that they wanted us to quench? His partner replies, "The hotheaded spirits of the politicians!"

12. (U) Drafted by Michael Meigs.

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted on our classified SIPRNET site <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/> along with extensive other material.
HERTELL